

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Sociology Department, Faculty Publications

Sociology, Department of

---

Fall 2007

### Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

Helen A. Moore

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [hmoore1@unl.edu](mailto:hmoore1@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

Moore, Helen A., "Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching" (2007). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 88.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/88>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# STUDENT RESISTANCE IN SOCIOLOGY CLASSROOMS: TOOLS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

**Helen A. Moore**

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

*Dr. Helen Moore is Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She was the keynote speaker at the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on the Pennsylvania Sociological Society held at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania October 13-14, 2006. Dr. Moore's research focuses on educational stratification including race, class, and gender issues as they link to economic outcomes. From 1999 to 2004 she edited the American Sociological Association's quarterly journal **Teaching Sociology**. Her most recent publications include "Testing Whiteness: No School Left Behind and co-authorship of a chapter entitled "Dialogue and Diversity Teaching: Reflections on Research, Pedagogy, and Passion for Social Justice. Dr. Moore is also co-director of a National Institute of Mental Health Career Opportunities in Research grant for American Indian undergraduate students and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Future Faculty program for advanced doctoral students.*

The Pennsylvania Sociological Society invited me to address the topic of Teaching in Difficult Times and challenges in teaching sociology. In our multiple roles as academics, we interact with students and their responses to our work on a variety of levels. They participate in our classrooms, they read our research and learn about the discipline of sociology through our scholarship and supervision of their student work. At all times, students evaluate us in our teaching: not just in formal summative evaluations at the closure of a semester or a student career, but also in their day-to-day responses to our classroom teaching efforts.

Academic reactions to students in the classroom, and sociologists' reactions to their students in particular, have been a dimension of our dialogue about teaching and scholarship for decades. A classic sub-topic of this discussion focuses on college students' resistance to our academic goals for the liberal arts curriculum in general, and student indifference or challenges within our individual classrooms. Perry's (1970) assessment of student stages of cognition is a useful beginning that focuses on levels of thinking and student cognitive resistance. McFarland (2001) extended sociological notions of oppositional behavior in schools to include disruptions in the classroom and Becker et al. (1985) analyzed the focus of their college students on the "grade point average perspective".

## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

This Pennsylvania State conference recognizes that sociologists work to teach new generations of learners during a time when race, gender and class inequalities continue to be debated in social policy and in our classrooms (Hedley and Markowitz 2001, Perry et al. 2005). It is also during a time of intensified assessment of our own teaching in the college classroom. These institutionalized activities provide rich theoretical reasons to understand more about student learning in a range of social environments, and to challenge our definitions and understandings of student resistance.

In this paper I focus on two arenas of student resistance that have come under closer sociological analysis. I do this to illustrate that teaching will always be difficult, but that we have more opportunities and challenges in these interesting times. One of those challenges just might be to expand our definitions of student resistance in order to further develop our own thinking about teaching and learning. The first form of student resistance I consider to be the “classic” form in which teachers focus on classroom disruptions and why their educational messages are not absorbed by students; the second is a more contemporary consideration of student resistance as a form of building social capital for learners and teachers alike.

Classic student resistance is taken as an affront to the authority of college professors and the meaning of the liberal arts degree (Perry 1970; Becker et al, 1985). The shared assumption is that most students are either unprepared or unwilling to learn what is presented in the traditional college classroom. Forms of student resistance might reflect cognitive deficits (dualistic thinking in Perry’s scheme) or a subculture of student resistance to the values of the academy (Becker et al.). Learning takes place in environments fraught with individual and group resistance, especially resistant to the dominant patterns of teaching and learning in the social structure of higher education.

The second more contemporary form of student resistance I bring to the discussion draws from critical perspectives on learning with classroom resistance serving as a form of social capital. These perspectives are often radical, critical or liberatory pedagogies that engage distinctive forms of resistance as a potential learning tool, or as a challenge to our mainstream sociological teaching strategies (Sweet 1998, Yasso 2005).

### **Student Resistance: Challenges to Authority and Cognition**

Perry’s (1970) early study of student resistance and cognition was initially motivated by his concerns that students lacked the requisite cognitive skills to accurately evaluate his classroom goals and processes on teaching evaluations. Despite this biased beginning, Perry’s data unfolded a more elaborate model of cognitive stages. He found among his Harvard undergraduate male students that first- and second-year college students were more likely to respond to classrooms

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

and materials with dualistic models of the world and expectations of their teachers. That is, he found that their skills were primarily based on recalling knowledge. He dubbed these students “dualistic thinkers” who look to authority figures for statements of facts and “right” and “wrong” answers. Critical education theorists refer to this form of learning and teaching as a “banking model” of education (Freire 1981). For Perry, these beginning skills of his elite students were evidence that students early in their college careers were unable to reflect deeply on what they learned or on what the goals might be of their instructors (and therefore were unlikely to provide valid teaching evaluations).

Perry concludes that our challenge is to move these students to more advanced stages of reflexive critical thinking that he found among some college juniors and seniors. He categorized these cognitive skills as multiplicity, reflection and commitment. These stages and their attendant skills closely parallel Bloom’s taxonomy of learning, emphasizing teaching goals to move students to higher levels of critical thinking that include application, analysis and synthesis of ideas.

Jerome Karabel’s brilliant history of *The Chosen* (2005) reminds us that in the 1960s Perry had access at Harvard only to males - and to students who were mostly white and mostly Christian – as a result of purposive admission standards. To challenge these narrow definitions of students and their skills, researchers and theorists have considered other “ways of knowing” in order to encompass new cohorts of learners. Freire (1980) argued that learning should be situated within student experiences, especially experiences of oppression. This pedagogy results in the student’s ability to deeply and critically interpret problems, exhibit self-confidence in democratic discussions, and take action as part of their refusal to shirk responsibility for oppression (*conscientization*) (Freire 1970, hooks 1994, Urrieta and Méndez Benavídez 2007).

Belenky (1997) and her colleagues analyzed and coded 135 in-depth interviews that asked women students about their gender, their relationships, their ways of knowing and moral dilemmas. The researchers formulated a theory of learning consisting of five types of “knowing” from which women perceive themselves and approach the world. They document women students moving from a stage as silent classroom participants who receive their instructor’s knowledge, toward connected knowers who believe that truth is “personal, particular, and grounded in firsthand experience” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1997: 113). They saw that the way that women think about education and learning also affects their self-perception and ability to engage in dialogue and act on their own behalf.

Sweet and other sociologists have argued for a radical pedagogy that engages a wider range of students, abandons lectures and privileges student empowerment (1998). Others have touted feminist pedagogy (Moore 1997, hooks 1994) or critical teaching methodologies as solutions to resistant students (Wright 1989, Bohmer and

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

Briggs 1991). At the same time, all acknowledge the difficulty in “balancing institutional constraints with (these) philosophical perspectives” (Sweet: 108).

### Sociologically Speaking to Student Resistance

I have treasured sociology as a discipline that builds on multiple methodologies and theoretical perspectives while integrating pedagogical debate. It brings a wide range of gifts to move into our classrooms with myriad “tools” to dismantle “dualism” and uninformed views of social patterns and processes. The challenge is to move student cognition, writing and activity toward multiplicity, reflection, synthesis and commitment (Wright 1989). More advanced forms of critical thinking are the underpinnings of the liberal arts and the sociology major. At its core, sociology, the Sociology of Education and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning helps us to map theories of student resistance and envision new strategies for new difficulties and challenges in the changing classroom environment.

### Teaching and Learning in Environments of Resistance

As teachers, we first need to recognize that resistance and learning may be inextricably linked. Some academics have argued that “oppositional” or “resistant” students are not only a challenge, but are not learners. Gross (2006) states:

*You know the signs: that student in the back row with his head on the desk, the worried-looking single mom who is falling further and further behind in her homework, the young guy who hasn't yet managed to get to a single class on-time...*

*Resistance to learning is the bane of our teaching. It undermines the morale of your class, saps your spirit, and results in student failure and discouragement.*

*As teachers, I think we sometimes duck dealing with this issue because these “oppositional” students (I don't think of them as learners!) threaten OUR self-image as creative, stimulating, successful teachers. In avoiding the issue, we ourselves resist learning – learning how to solve this problem.*

But Gross ignores the signs that these three students may reflect distinctive forms of resistance. The student in the back row with his head on the desk may well be a first-generation college attendee whose class or cultural background disconnects from the language, concepts or goals of a particular instructor; the “young guy” who is constantly tardy may be working full time in order to pay an increasing percentage of his instructor's salary as state's abandon public higher education budgets. Finally, the single mom who is falling further and further behind is lumped together with these “oppositional” students as another non-learner who threatens instructor self esteem. Gross reinforces the notion of the “teacher centered” definition of the classroom situation and students as alienated from his teaching goals.

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

Two sociological definitions of student resistance follow this same pathway (McFarland 2001, Becker, et al. 1985). These researchers conceptualize classroom resistance by focusing on disruptions from the perspective of teachers and asking why educational messages are not absorbed by students. Other sociologists have highlighted the role that classroom observations provide into the everyday resistance patterns of students. [Paul Willis contrasted “the [rebellious] lads” of the working class and their conformist peers (the ‘earholes’) as social class-generated patterns of resistance to formal education goals.]

McFarland defines resistance as:

*A central, endemic problem of educational systems...classroom disruptions and defiance of teacher authority bring the instructional process to a grinding halt...These moments of resistance, then, are windows into social processes that construct, maintain and permanently alter social settings.*

His main thesis is that high school classroom social networks and instructional formats explain a great deal more about these types of disruptions than student background characteristics alone. He operationalized resistance as public acts (not private collusions) that are recognized by the participants and observers as a profane communication. In the two high schools he studied, student complaints and jokes are considered passive forms of resistance and are not aimed at transforming the school. But the more profane a complaint or joke becomes, the more it resembles an attack “akin to forms of active resistance.” Almost always, this resistance is verbally confirmed by the outrage of the teacher (the teacher defines the situation). “The intent of the act must be recognized as oppositional and as profane with regard to the classroom moral order” (McFarland: 633). These acts of resistance can easily be witnessed since they are public problems, or spikes in social experience that are publicly recognized.

McFarland then asks what initiates or constrains disruptive classroom behavior (what opens and closes floodgates of disruption)? He found that substantial variation (14 - 31 percent of total variation) in student defiance was attributed to classroom-level variations. Teacher-centered instructional models had a significant dampening effect on student defiance, while student-centered tasks increased defiance. The “good” students (as measured by GPA) were 16% less likely to cause trouble in class. Interestingly, students with dense social networks (defined as high social regard - with an additional 2.21 friends) increased the likelihood to rebel by 36 percent. McFarland tagged these latter popular students as having “political rights to make explicit efforts at redirecting class.”

He did find that other individual student characteristics do matter. Boys appeared more willing to adopt aggressive face work as an appropriate strategy of

## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

action, as did students rated as more physically attractive. McFarland concludes that individual students struggle for identity and control and this becomes endemic to every classroom since every student is “subordinated in the school.” Adolescents and young adults struggle to acquire greater personal autonomy within a classroom system that rigidly defines their behaviors.

And in this struggle, the “prestigious, well-connected students who dominate the class and challenge authority” will always confront teachers more successfully. Indeed, McFarland documents that “actors who do not have social network resources and choose the wrong situation in which to rebel will find the costs to such action high and their efforts to alter the setting short-lived. In certain regards, the most disadvantaged students who rebel in the least appropriate moments are the most likely to come to tragic ends” (2001: 666).

Becker and colleagues (1985) focus a parallel set of questions at the college level. By observing student classroom responses and campus activities, they develop the notion of the student “GPA perspective.” What the rules are about grades and where students stand in respect to them become the primary interest of students in relationship to their classrooms and instructors (Becker et al. 1985). In addition to the formal requirements for receiving a the grade, students “try to discover whether the instructor has tastes they should cater to or prejudices they should avoid arousing in preparing examinations” (p. 82). The authors construct the source of this perspective in the institutionalization of grades as the primary reward within higher education (p. 121). Students are subjected to these rules about GPA as a reward system that is set out and reinforced by administrators and faculty members. For these researchers (simultaneously classroom instructors) the GPA perspective distorts the goals of learning. They point out that students who achieve the minimum GPA necessary to meet a goal (stay enrolled, able to participate in athletics or other extracurricular activities, enter into a restricted program, etc.) may then revise their efforts downward once the minimum is achieved. As such, all college students are perceived as less interested in learning (Rabow et al. 1998) than in the pursuit of a higher GPA, and those students who resist from positions of subordination are most likely to suffer the consequences (McFarland). I find it troublesome when such models reinforce the banking patterns of education and teacher-centered models of learning, even indirectly.

### **Can We Turn Resistance on Its Head?**

I now enter this discussion with pedagogical reports from college classroom instructors that reflect these classic forms of student resistance. My goal is to ignite awareness among sociologists that most definitions of resistance available to us in the literature defeat our pedagogical goals of working with more diverse groups of students toward higher order cognitive skills. These illustrations may bring back less-than-fond memories, but might also re-focus our definitions of student

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

resistance. Whether you are a stern lecturer of teacher-centered curricula, or a warm and fuzzy facilitator of student-centered exploration, or perhaps an instructor who galvanizes students to social action (or a mix of these on a specific day or in a specific curriculum), our experiences as instructors do inform our definitions of student resistance, and the pedagogies we use to engage it.

Among new sociology graduate student instructors, our graduate program conducts a required semester seminar on Teaching Sociology. These students, often at the M.A. level, assist faculty members in traditional classrooms. They often resonate with Perry's model of "dualistic" thinkers as a way to handle their own cognitive dissonance in conducting "discussion sections" with sub-sets of 30-50 students from larger lecture halls. One graduate teaching assistant presented to the seminar a well-conceptualized lesson plan on Weber's *verstehen* that "did not go over well" with students and generated substantial resistance. He began with a discussion of world views associated with 9/11 events in the United States, especially views of the perpetrators. His effort was to lead a discussion of where and why these suicide/murderers are viewed as "martyrs." He introduced evidence of the consistent selection of economic and military targets for destruction that reflect views of "revolutionaries" waging war against capitalism and religious oppression.

This apprentice instructor believed that the conceptual "tool" of *verstehen* would disrupt these students' normative understanding of Sept 11 and allow them to examine their taken-for-granted definitions of patriotism and morality. When a number of students reacted strongly and emotionally and side-tracked his goals, he chalked it up to "dualistic" thinking.

In my own teaching of a course on violence against women, I struggle constantly with the students' understanding of the concept of the "Just World Hypothesis." Their strongly-held belief that people get what they deserve is a particularly wicked element of the individualistic Protestant Ethic mixed with Karma. Indeed, I find that academics often create our own "blame the victim/student" approach to teaching. We assert that in a "just classroom" - if students were prepared, emotionally non-resistant and cognitively able - that our lesson plans would flow and students would achieve enhanced critical thinking. What these two brief examples suggest is that we need (or I need) expanded definitions of student resistance to better assess how to pass on sociology as a discipline.

Davis reminds us that what makes sociology (especially courses in stratification) "most exciting to teach also makes them most difficult to teach" (1992: 232). She outlines three classroom climates she has confronted in teaching about inequality - classrooms of resistance, paralysis and rage. For this essay, I focus on her definition of "the resisting class" and "the enraged class." Her resisting students "deny the existence or importance of inequality or may argue that conditions are improving - or defensively deny that race class or gender inequalities result from unequal access to



## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

opportunities or other structural factors” (p.232). Much of this derives, according to Davis, from pervasive individualism (legitimizing inequality as a legitimate sorting device), distortions by the media (instant problem solving and social class biases), inexperience and homogeneous positions of privilege.

Davis notes that some resistance is “healthy” as it reflects student struggles with issues. However, she does not delineate the sources of that resistance, and how these differ from the positions of fear and privilege and protection that underlie the call to patriotism imbedded in imagery of “September 11” in the contemporary United States. She does encourage sociologists to gently guide and challenge, encourage and explore “in an atmosphere that has respect for differences in viewpoint” (p. 235).

Moore (1997) defined resistance as an “unwillingness to consider research or theories that contradict one’s sense of social order...” and she usefully distinguishes this form of resistance from “challenging research or a theory; this can be valuable and may result in the most instructive class discussions.” Her definition restricts resistance to student denial or recalcitrance, and resistance “is problematic because it acts as a barrier to learning” (p. 128). Similarly, Hedley and Markowitz (2001) view student resistance to sociological analysis in the classroom as linked to “moral reductionism.” They contend that norm/“other” dichotomies are tactics used in the classroom by students because students accept dominant norms and individualism as legitimate, natural and desirable.

Haddad and Liberman (2002) argue that some forms of student resistance can be explained “partially by their privileged race, class and academic statuses” (p. 331). They set resistance in the context of increasing student conservatism, adherence to models of “color blind” race relations, and the difficulty of teaching about inequality to students from dominant groups. These efforts to understand resistance as deriving from positions of privilege suggest that we contrast how resistance might look among those students who are marginalized within society and perhaps within our classrooms and pedagogies.

Certainly Freire developed his notions of reflection and action by learners first among those groups who were excluded from formal education and whose inability to access literacy was a cornerstone of their economic and political oppression (1980). For those of us challenged to enhance the learning of college students, the roots of their resistances may arise from a wide range of social positions, not just from privilege, not just from identity rebellion, not just from entrenched cognitive stages of development.

### **Teaching and Learning with Resistance as a Form of Capital**

From the literature focusing on frameworks and theories of learning, Stage et al. (1998) have identified general practices that promote learning for all college students

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

and that draw from research on diverse student learning models as well as critical education theories:

- Social learning experiences, such as peer teaching and group projects, particularly those that promote group construction of knowledge, allow a student to observe other students' models of successful learning, and encourage him or her to emulate them (social constructivism, self-efficacy, learning styles);
- Varying instructional models that deviate from the lecture format, such as visual presentations, site visits, and use of the Internet (multiple intelligences, learning styles, self-efficacy);
- Varying expectations for students' performance, from individual written formats to group work that includes writing and presentation, interpretation of theatrical, dance, musical, or artistic work, and performance of actual tasks at a work site (attribution theory, *conscientization*, multiple intelligences, learning styles);
- Choices that allow students to capitalize on personal strengths and interests (self-efficacy, multiple intelligences, learning styles);
- Overt use of sociocultural situations and methods that provide authentic contexts and enculturation into an academic disciplinary community (social constructivism, *conscientization*);
- Course material that demonstrates valuing of diverse cultures, ethnic groups, classes, and genders (*conscientization*, empowered learning styles).

Approaches to learning that promote social constructivism, or learning within a social context, and that feature active group constructions of knowledge provide an ideal environment for some learners. An emphasis on learning that creates awareness of students' social conscience and that promotes an awareness of possibilities for social transformation through action can stimulate learning, particularly for students from traditionally disadvantaged groups (Barr and Tagg 1995).

Following these broader discussions, Bell et al. (1999) wrangle directly with disruption and resistance as opportunities to break out of passive/banking modes. Despite the emancipatory aims of critical and feminist pedagogies, they conclude that "our students have not always welcomed practice originating therein." They view student resistance as originating in structural barriers that emphasize teaching as authority based, and learning as the passive reception of "objective" knowledge. Bell and her colleagues caution that battles over meritocracy will continue to marginalize subordinated groups' knowledge. AS a result, we may find that privileged students put every identity under political pressure and move towards Perry's model of multiplicity (or multiculturalism) without reflection or commitment. They caution us not to link concepts of inequality to superficial concepts of "tolerance" with no consideration of how differences can be socially produced and constructed. Sociology as a discipline provides us the models. Their

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

classroom solutions focus on the “authorization of student experience” as a crucial form of student empowerment. They note that it is easier in these classes to authorize those voices marginalized, than those whose *verstehen* we need and perhaps want to challenge. Bell and colleagues have a pedagogical goal to foster “public cultures of dissent” and to recognize that students of color may come with more and different skills in these endeavors. These skills will not match the academic models of individual standardized verbal assertiveness and may take a good deal of energy to generate. Overall, these authors are moving toward seeing resistance as a positive factor in the classroom.

The scholarship of teaching and learning has been accelerated by our disciplinary strengths in the sociology of education, in general theoretical modeling that readily connects us to many of the insights into inequality from reforms generated by critical and radical pedagogies. But we may not be extending this sociological imagination into the classroom. Sweet (1998) raised the question of how many sociology faculty assign critical social theory and the degree to which their pedagogical approaches coincide. This opened an extended debate on the role of radical teaching within institutions of higher education. Wright’s (1989) earlier endorsement of a “radical pedagogical model that empowers students as resisters” by offering them opportunities to write and speak to their own interests may not tip the balance as far as some sociologists seek to move. It may also be necessary to exercise teacher authority enough to interrupt relations and ideologies of domination in classrooms when resistance is exercised out of privilege. But the balancing of student resistance with our many teaching goals is more difficult when resistance is viewed unilaterally as the enemy.

### Turning Student Resistance on its Head

Yasso (2005) begins her work with a new assumption: that student resistance is a necessary educational dimension. She then interrogates the notion that classrooms, teachers and students do reflect conflicting forms of cultural capital in representing their identities and communities. Challenges to racism can reveal cultural wealth and provide the critiques of deficit theorizing that stifle social resistance.

In doing so, she develops the concept of “Resistant Capital.” Unlike the cultural capital of the dominant group that constructs the dominant knowledge base reflected in standardized test, this form of capital is generated through acts of resistance within schools. These contain the knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality on a day-to-day basis (Freire 1970, Yasso 2005).

Yasso highlights three elements of resistance capital:

1. That resistance to class and racial barriers can transcend Willis’ and Ogbu’s definitions of self-defeating behaviors among subordinated groups. She cites research on African American mothers who *raise their daughters as “resistors”*

## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

- as intelligent, and worthy of respect in order to resist a barrage of societal and educational messages devaluing Blackness and black women.
- 2. That such resistance can lead to different forms of oppositional behavior, including self-defeating or conformist strategies (attachment to negative peers, folding to sexual pressure, etc.) that feed back into systems of subordination.
- 3. The key is that when students are informed with a recognition of the structural nature of oppression and have motivation to work toward social and racial justice, then resistance takes on a transformative form.

This transformative notion of resistance embraces social change and intersects with many important learning components. Yasso helps us to reconfigure Bordieu's notion of cultural capital as "funds of knowledge" that exist in every cultural niche and she encourages us not to be naïve about the way capital can be deployed to create hierarchy and inequity. When we ignore non-dominant forms of capital in the classroom, we help to recreate larger social inequalities. Yasso encourages instructors to commit to develop classrooms that acknowledge the multiple strengths of Communities of Color in order to serve a larger purpose of struggle toward social and racial justice.

Sociology is rich in providing important tools for us to understand how cultural knowledge and practices intersect with structures of racism and other forms of inequality in our classrooms. The scholarship of teaching and learning within our discipline has exposed those structures in our own classroom patterns and helped to identify strategies for change. My goal is to identify ways to "dance through the minefield" of multiple forms of student resistances as outlined by Yasso, with a goal of increasing all students' critical thinking skills.

### **Discussion, Application and Synthesis**

Teaching in difficult times is made more challenging and rewarding when we recognize that our students bring these many forms of resistance into the classroom. We can identify that our traditional definitions of resistance might trap us into privileging some forms of student capital over others. More specifically, I want to close by presenting a concrete notion of how we might teach to multiple forms of student resistance in the same classroom.

When students engage in dualistic thinking about "black and white" dimensions of issues, we have several challenges. First, we can reflect on those settings where dualistic thinking is connected to privileged status, or when dualistic thinking is cemented in subordination and pessimism. Both can be challenged in our classrooms with new sociological knowledge - but the classroom processes themselves will also be multiple and complex. For some of our students, our teaching goals may be to

## Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching

expand their knowledge base of dominance and subordination systems and how these are developed and maintained in a society (e.g., for students of color to understand more about intersections of class). For other students, the goal may be to disrupt their taken-for-granted understandings of these social patterns that have been framed by their positions of privilege. Some may have less visible forms of subordination and privilege that they have not yet connected to structural oppressions (gay/lesbian, first generation college attendees, legacy admissions, etc.). Other students may be more advanced in their critiques of social inequality and may be searching for sociologically informed maps of social justice and an expansion of their resistance capital.

Bohmer and Liberman (1991) found that students from privileged race and class backgrounds frequently are “hostile, or at best neutral to presentations on race, class and gender stratification; often they respond with guilt, anger or resistance” (p. 154). These authors outline a series of steps by which they integrate teaching about oppression consistently throughout a traditional social psychology course. Haddad and Liberman (2002) assigned honors students the task of analyzing scientific racism within a journal article on race and intelligence. They noted the “increasingly conservative” status of their students and the general college population, and “we are increasingly encountering student resistance” (p. 339). The students’ cognitive dissonance (feelings of tension that come from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time) about gaining access to an elite seminar through standardized tests scores became a tool for developing their sociological imaginations. Festinger (1957) described such dissonance as increasing when the issue is important to us, when dissonant thoughts conflict strongly, and when we cannot “explain away” the conflict.”

In my own courses, I transform the insights of Perry (1970) and Becker et al. (1985) by focusing on their concerns about dualist thinking and GPA perspectives and turning these to my own goal: to privilege certain forms of emancipatory or *transformative* (in Yasso’s terms) resistance over others. This resistance can and should be framed on the strengths of sociological theory and research that draws on sociocultural situations and methods. As sociologists, we can challenge the narrow and privileged definitions of resistance set out by McFarland and echoed by the work of Becker. How can this be accomplished within the confines of one classroom?

One very flexible tool, cognitive mapping, was introduced to our discipline through the scholarship of Barbara Trepagnier (2002) and I have adapted it to many classroom settings. She describes cognitive mapping as an assignment that releases the sociological imagination in our students, and I use this explicitly to create both a knowledge base about inequality and some feelings of dissonance among students privileged by their race, class and/or gender. It also allows me to bridge across many forms of resistance and to empower students inside the classroom to connect to transformative possibilities outside of the classroom.

## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

Following Trepagnier's assignment, students are provided with an alphabetic listing (to obscure automatic theoretical linkages) of 20-25 key inequality concepts and theorists. Students are then instructed to cut out the pieces and try different arrangements of the terms, searching for a pattern that is theoretically sound and reflects their understanding of inequality. Students are also instructed to link the concepts/names with 1) a simple line (with no arrow), 2) a one-way arrow, or 3) a two-way arrow. They next write a short rationale that is "a written commentary that clarifies each of the links on the map...and as they articulate the relationships they intuitively perceive as logical, they are forced to think through the implications of the proposed links" (p. 110)

Trepagnier required that all conceptual pieces be used in one summative assignment of student understanding. However, I have modified this into a three-stage assignment. For example, the first assignment comes early in the semester, perhaps in an upper division course on stratification. The list to students includes standard concepts (education, occupation, mobility, class, labor markets, etc.) and topics for policy consideration (welfare reform, immigration rights, etc.). Students are invited to "park" concepts they do not yet understand in a corner of their map (typically concepts such as "social capital" are selected to be parked). This first map becomes a pre-test of their understanding of inequality.

In a second step, their initial maps and rationales are presented to each other in small groups. I grade these maps in a preliminary way, focusing on feedback and questions to prod their thinking or point out contradictions to increase their dissonance. At this time, they can gather insights into how other students conceptualize inequality, or how they "use" particular concepts and tie them to specific social policies or social justice beliefs. Here the range of transformative capital among students is highlighted: some students argue for increasing police enforcement, others identify immigration policies, education systems or welfare programs as targets for change. Later during the semester readings and discussions, we agree to "add in" a limited number of specific inequality concepts such as home ownership, the G.I. Bill, standardized testing, or corporate taxes, and we further discuss and question the concepts they "parked" earlier in the semester.

My students are also assigned a separate in-depth semester research paper on a substantive topic in stratification (elite schooling, welfare rights, worker benefits, socioeconomic residential segregation, etc.). The third step of the concept map assignment is to re-draw their first map using at least two new concepts from their own research that they want to add to their final map (again including theory and policy components in the map). The rationale they write for the map now includes materials from their semester paper, including a preferred theory and concepts, appropriate research, and their own application of policy. The final map becomes a poster that they present during the last week of class, giving them the opportunity to explain sociologically their linkage of theory to research to policy to action. Students who actively work on national or local inequality issues display their

## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

sociological linkages. Undergraduate students might generate a senior honor's thesis topic, or practice for a conference poster session. Graduate students identify gaps in their logic or methods (especially their measurement of social class indicators) for a thesis or dissertation; they also benefit from the ability to think about how they might teach these concepts of inequality. For me, the final map becomes an assessment tool of how they have grown conceptually in their understanding of inequality.

“Without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow” (hooks 1994: 202). I wish for my students what I wish for myself: that reflection and transgression might be generated in both our teaching and our learning. On behalf of our discipline, we might change our informal talk and research from the narrow understanding of student resistance as a barrier to our teaching-centered goals and instead allow ourselves and our students to reconstruct transformative resistance as an undervalued student and classroom resource.

## **References**

- Barr, Robert and John Tagg. 1995. From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 6: 12-25.
- Becker, Howard, Blanche Geer and Everett Cherrington Hugh. *Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life*. Transaction Press.
- Belenky, Mary, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, and Jill Tarule. (1997). *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*. (Tenth anniversary edition). Basic Books.
- Bell, Sandra, Marina Morrow and Evangelia Tastsogloul. 1999 Teaching in Environments of Resistance: Toward a Critical, Feminist and Anti-racist Pedagogy. In Mayberry and Rose (eds.) Meeting the Challenge. Routledge.
- Bohmer, Susanne and Joyce Briggs. 1991. Teaching Privileged Students about Gender, Race, and Class Oppression. *Teaching Sociology* 19: 154-163
- Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford University Press
- Freire, Paulo. 1981. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. Continuum Press. Freire, Paulo and Antonio Faundez. 1989. Learning to question. New York: Continuum.
- Gross, Ronald. Motivating Resistant Students. (Retrieved October <http://adulted.about.com/od/teachertoolkit/a/motivation.htm>. Columbia University.
- Hedley, Mark and Linda Markowitz. 2001. "Avoiding Moral Dichotomies: Teaching Controversial Topics to Resistant Students." *Teaching Sociology* 29: 195-208.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress*. Routledge.
- Karabel, Jerome. 2005. *The Chosen*. Harvard.
- Angela T. Haddad, Leonard Lieberman. 2002. From Student Resistance to Embracing the Sociological Imagination: Unmasking Privilege, Social Conventions, and Racism. *Teaching Sociology*, 30: 328-341
- McFarland, Daniel A. 2001. Student Resistance: How the Formal and Informal Organization of Classrooms Facilitate Everyday Forms of Student Resistance. *American Journal of Sociology*.
- Melanie Moore. 1997. Student Resistance to Course Content: Reactions to the Gender of the Messenger. *Teaching Sociology*: 25: 128-133.



## **Student Resistance in Sociology Classrooms: Tools for Learning and Teaching**

- Perry, William. 1970. Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years. Harvard.
- Rabow, Jerome, Hee-Jin Cjoi and Darcy Purdy. 1998. Youth and Society: 451-470.
- Stage, Frances, Patricia Muller, Jillian Kinzie, and Ada Simmons. 1998. Creating learning centered classrooms. What does learning theory have to say? Washington, DC: George Washington Univ., ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. [ED422777]
- Stephen Sweet, 1998. Practicing Radical Pedagogy: Balancing Ideals with Institutional Constraints. Teaching Sociology, 26: 100-111.
- Nancy J. Davis, 1992. Teaching about Inequality: Student Resistance, Paralysis, and Rage. Teaching Sociology: 22: 232-238
- Trepagnier, Barbara. 2002. Mapping Sociological Concepts. Teaching Sociology, 30: 108-120.
- Tara Yasso. 2005. Whose culture has capital? Race, Ethnicity and Education: 69-91.
- Urrieta and Méndez Benavídez. 2007. Community Commitment and Activist Scholarship: *Chicana/o* Professors and the Practice. Journal of Hispanic Higher Education: 222-236.
- Wright, Richard. 1989. Toward a Theoretical Conceptualization of "Silence in the Classroom": A Response to Gimenez. Teaching Sociology, 17: 194-196
- Willis, Paul. Learning to Labour. 1977.